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ABSTRACT

Despite current process theories of composition, many teachers of writing still adopt traditional pedagogical approaches in the classroom. Under the "old pedagogy," correctness is valued over content, revision is approached as cosmetic change, formulaic rhetorical modes are taught before students set pen to paper, and the lecture is still the favorite instructional method. When teachers base their composition courses on what students will have to know to graduate or to enter other courses, they are saying that composition amounts to a university service course, that it is a primer for correctness. Instead of seeing student errors as a natural step in the process of learning to write, these teachers equate mistakes with lack of progress and, moreover, they fail to come to terms with the unsettled, transitory nature of language and writing. Composition teachers who view their discipline as a grammar or service course allow the curriculum to be set by members of other departments. On the other hand, composition teachers who create an environment in which students can write and respond to each other's writing, serve their students well. Consideration of cognitive development when determining composition curriculum is also within the student's best interest. The criteria the new rhetoricians have for effective student writing are different from those of past generations and, by challenging that past, process-oriented composition, teachers can make their own new, pertinent, and powerful history. (NKA)

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The Power of the Past: Inquiries into the Old Pedagogy

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The Power of the Past: Inquiries into the Old Pedagogy

At the 1986 4C's, I read a paper on the disenfranchisement of student writers. In the paper, I described ways in which students are prevented from assuming power over their own texts, and explored reasons for teachers subverting student efforts. This issue of power in the composition classroom has continued to fascinate--and sometimes haunt--me. Each year I teach a graduate research methodologies course; every month I read all the major journals on composition theory and pedagogy; daily I speak with composition faculty about their teaching. And still I am nonplussed by members of the profession who proceed in their thinking and teaching as though nothing has happened in research and theory that can influence and change their thinking about and teaching of composition.

I don't think that I am the only person who is confused: consider the number of times you attended the 4C's or some other conference at which composition was the focus of inquiry and commented to a neighbor or friend, "The people who most need to hear this are some of my colleagues back home!" In fact, I've come to believe that conferences such as this one reinforce and confirm what most of us already do in our composition classrooms as much as disseminate new research and thinking in composition studies. And by that, I do not mean to belittle, downgrade, or discount the necessity and importance of the conferences. Rather, I praise them for supporting and confirming what many of us are doing in our classrooms and in our scholarship.

Instead of simply championing the cause of the process approach to composition or of students' writing as the focus of the composition course, conferencing, peer groups, and the like, I think it important to examine the grip that the old pedagogy continues to have on the profession. By the old pedagogy, I refer to traditional approaches to the teaching of composition: the study of correctness taking precedence over the study of students' writing; the focus on reading professional essays over reading students' papers; the approach to revision as nothing more than cosmetic changes in prose; the overt teaching of formulaic rhetorical modes before students set pen to paper; the use of the lecture as the principal pedagogical instrument in the classroom.

The thinking that underlies such a pedagogy is illustrated by statements uttered by professors whenever the discussion of the teaching of composition turns to what students should know before leaving composition courses. These statements include the following: "They will have to know_____ when they _____"; That's the way I learned _____"; and "It's important for them to learn _____." Before addressing these three statements individually, let me say that more than different approaches to teaching (methodologies or pedagogies) are being called in question. <u>What</u> is being taught is at issue. The pedagogies are, I believe, a natural outgrowth of one's theoretical leanings.

When teachers state that students "will have to know" this, that, or the other when they take another course that demands writing, graduate from college, enter graduate school or the work force, they are saying, consciously or unconsciously, that composition amounts to a service course for the university--or, in some people's minds, to the advancement of "literacy," whichever way they perceive of that thorny term.

That many teachers view composition as a service course is not necessarily to be construed with their undercutting or downplaying the importance of the course. For teachers to say that "students will have to know _____" is to say that they view what they teach as the foundation of education, central to students' success in other fields, and their teaching it is crucial. There is much pride in pursuing such a mission, meeting the challenge, and doing the job well. That is the most optimistic view of service courses, however. A more frustrating, discouraging, and unfortunate one is more often the case.

When teachers base their composition courses on what students will have to know either in other courses or in the future workplace, their courses run the risk of falling into the rank of service courses in the worst possible sense. To see composition as, say, a primer in correctness, is to see a cour in little more than black and white. That is, matters of correctness are easily detectable, right or wrong, and therefore easier to grade than to see composition as the written evolution of ideas. Errors are threatening to many teachers: instead of

being viewed as a natural step in the process of learning to write, they connote lack of good instruction, lack of progress, all ending in a teacher's or student's failing.

Further, by teaching composition as a grammar course, a course which advances the strict following of rhetorical modes, a survey of professional essays, or a course which doesn't aggressively promote revision, teachers do not open themselves to the unsettled, transitory nature of language and writing; nor do they make themselves vulnerable to the false starts, the bumbling nature of composing, the adding, deleting, rearranging, rethinking, the continuous creation that epitomizes writing. The fear of the unknown--students' ideas--is bypassed for a more secure, firmer ground of correct and incorrect, right or wrong organization and development of papers, and what amounts to a prescriptive formula for "competent" or "inoffensive" prose. As Lucy A. Chittenden wrote in her 1895 textbook, Elements of English Composition, "Even before the student has attained the maturity of mind necessary for the formal study of rhetoric, [these lessons] will enable him (sic) to become a tolerably correct composer; at least to avoid the blunders if not acquire the graces of composition" (Judy 39). Over seventy years old, Chittenden's text still is exemplary of many of the attitudes overheard in Department coffee rooms and English faculty offices, and finds its way into composition classroom practices.

To make matters worse, by viewing composition as a grammar or service course, teachers are agreeing to the usurpation of

their courses. The curriculum, then, is set by members of other departments who seemingly do not prefer to help students master the conventions of what they deem important in writing. Composition teachers become the slaves of the profession, or as Richard Lanham so aptly called them, "the window washers of the academy." Members of other departments have the power to teach what they want, but such power is forfeited by the "service course" contingency. Unfortunately, we become our own enemies when we embrace such thinking that our courses have no integrity other than to serve the academy.

I might add that because many of us do not embrace the notion of composition as a service course in a traditional sense does not mean that the composition courses we teach do not serve our students well. Instead, by creating an environment in which students can write and respond to each other's writing, we are serving our students very well indeed. We are providing students with an education that addresses how to go about writing and reading, how to create and recreate, and how to achieve such "making of meaning," all based on cognitive development and composition theory. Thus, we serve our students well, and perhaps advance a new definition of what a "service" course can and should be.

The second statement we often hear from teachers, "That's the way I learned _____," while not totally defensible as a pedagogy is nonetheless also understandable. It smacks of an allegiance to the past, to the way teachers learned to write, and

to a frequently held and dangerous belief that "if it was good enough for me, it is good enough for my students." Consider the number of times we were students and enamoured with how a certain teacher approached a particular topic; consider the number of times we left classes determined to replicate for our students what we just experienced as students ourselves. Or the opposite, negative modelling: "When I teach, I'll never do that to my students."

The power of the past is difficult, if not impossible in many cases, to overcome. For the past holds history, tradition, and all that entails. The familiar is, indeed, comfortable. Consider the case at Harvard College in the late 19th century. Professor L. B. R. Briggs, in "The Correction of Bad English as a Requirement for Admission to Harvard College" advocated "a program which could include early training in formal grammar, drills in 'laws' of sentence structure, in addition to frequent writing practice with careful correction of errors" (Judy 37). Briggs went on to call for parsing and grammatical analyses. His rationale for such a program was partially sentimental: he himself went through rigorous grammar drills when in school. The Harvard examination soon became an example for other schools to follow (Judy 37). Thus, the inclination for "Harvardizing."

Briggs and Harvard College are but one example of teachers not being the best test of learning; that is, the sole reason a particular teaching strategy or topic worked for one person does not necessarily mean it will be effective or successful for

others. It is important to realize that English professors, after all, most likely were English majors in college, already in love with and fascinated by the power and majesty of language and literature. They therefore saw and responded to areas of study differently from non-majors.

Curriculum matters cannot be decided upon simply because they were once helpful to and successful for a select few; rather all students must be considered: English major and non-major, strong writer and weak writer, the proficient and not-so-proficient student. This is especially true of students now attending the universities: the academy now serves a wide and diverse sector of the population, and if programs are to be as successful as possible, we must attend to all students, regardless of prior academic achievement.

Further, any talk of curriculum and learning should include the area of cognitive development. In brief, students learn at different paces, and teachers need to be aware of and respect those differences. Years ago, Chomsky differentiated between comprehension and performance: students may be equipped to understand a concept, but actually using it in their own writing may be another matter. Teachers need to understand the time lag that is inate to learning. In all of this, too, is the teaching-learning dichotomy, especially where writing is concerned. Teachers can present to students the most inspired, creative, and masterful lectures on parsing, the correct use of punctuation, the importance of parallelism, etc., but if it bears no immediate

and direct relevance to what the student is writing, the lesson might be for naught.

The last statement I wish to address this morning is something of an amalgamation of the two previous statements I have discussed. As such, it combines the futurity of "students will have to know" with the past of "it's the way I learned" to form a statement that addresses the present: "It's important for students to learn _____." The very theoretical foundations and pedagogical implications of teachers' courses are at the center of any inquiry into this statement.

The question of what students should know from having taken a composition course requires teachers to articulate what they find valuable and deem important in non-fiction prose. Moreover, a complex and thorny question must be addressed: what is composition for, or what does it seek to achieve? Any answer to this inquiry--and a too often overlooked area--is predicated on the century in which it is being asked: in its 2500 year history, from the Classicists to the Medievalists, from the Renaissance to the Age of Reason and up to the twentieth century, rhetoric has focused on many different concerns--audience, logic, style, eloquence, organization, and invention, etc.

New understandings of "the study of English" have been recursive and have characterized the thinking in rhetoric's 2500 year history. Grammar, for example, was "the first formal study of English to become a widespread part of the curriculum" (Applebee 6). But a markedly different understanding became

apparent in the latter part of the 19th century when the actual practice of writing, as opposed to the sole, overt studying of rules, was deemed the best way to promote improved writing among students by two influential textbook writers, George Pyn Quakenbos and Richard Greene Parker (Judy 35). And the last 20 years have produced a renewed and increased interest in Composition, rhetoric, and their pedagogical implications.

In A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, Erica Lindemann addresses this very issue when she states, "...rhetoric changes. People change it as they use language to communicate with each other....Knowing that rhetoric is a dynamic process permits us to question assumptions which presume rhetoric 'has always been thus' or 'ought to treat such and such.' It makes no more sense to assume that rhetoric is principally concerned with persuasion, or with stylistic flair, or with literary analysis than it would to assert that our students must demonstrate the elocutionary skills of medieval preachers...Instead, we must understand the varied and changing purposes people have for using language so that we can teach intelligently the arts of rhetoric our culture now practices" (Lindemann 57).

The power of the past, the grip the old pedagogy continues to have on the profession, is based on a logical, orderly, static view of language and ways to present such a vast amount of information to students. It is predicated on ways in which students can make the fewest mistakes (such as in correctness, organization, logic, etc.). It strives for a mastery of

conventions and infelicities absent in student papers. Indeed, it reflects the historical and cultural importance one attributes to written discourse. For those teachers who view writing as ever-changing, dynamic, and a way to discover what you didn't know you already knew, the old pedagogy falls short. It simply doesn't share the same concerns of the new rhetoricians or, at best, the criteria teachers have for effective student writing are different from past generations' or hold different degrees of importance. The charge, then, is to be mindful of, challenge, and refine the past, thereby making our own new, pertinent and powerful history. Perhaps then the next generation of composition teachers will discover the power of the past in the contributions we have made to the field.

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